



South Shore Estuary Cultural Survey

- A Project of Long Island Traditions -

TIPS FOR DOCUMENTATION

Taking Architectural Photographs

Courtesy of Traditional Arts of Upstate New York

Adapted from David Ames' "A Primer on Architectural Photography and the Photo Documentation of Historic Structures" *University of Delaware*

The Essential Views

The purpose of photographic documentation of historic structures is to preserve as much visual information about a structure in **as few photographs as possible**. The photographer must identify the views that reveal the most information about a structure. In looking for that view, you need to think about the attributes of a building: overall shape, size, and major architectural elements such as windows, doors, construction materials, and architectural ornamentation. Photographs often directly indicate construction material [log, masonry, or frame, etc.]. They also suggest certain attributes of the building or its uses. The distribution of doors and windows, for example, can suggest the interior floor plan. A single photograph can include most of these elements.

If you were allowed only one photograph to document a historic structure, what would it be? **The best choice would be a perspective showing the front and one side of the building, when taken from a 45 degree angle from the front.** When framing the building in the viewfinder, be sure that the entire building is visible including the point where the building meets the ground and without clipping off the peak of the roof or chimney. Although this sounds obvious, beginning photographers are often seduced by buildings and attracted by interesting details such as carpenter cut jigsaw porches, pointed Gothic windows, and Greek Revival columns. Unfortunately, the resulting pictures sometimes fail to record a view showing the entire structure. To avoid this problem, include the surroundings of the building, its site, and landscape context. As the subject of the photograph, the building should occupy about 75 percent of the picture area, leaving the surrounding 25 percent of the frame to show visual information about the context of the building.

The Seven Essential Photographs:

1. The front and one side
2. The rear and one side
3. The front elevation
4. Environmental view showing the building as part of its larger landscape
5. Interior view, showing major features of the building
6. Major elements of the building, including doors, windows, additions
7. Details such as materials and hardware

Case Study: A Bay House in the Town of Hempstead.



A bay house in the Town of Hempstead, built c. 1952.

Illustration #1

If you were allowed only one photograph to document a historic structure, the best choice would be a perspective showing the front and one side of the building



Illustration #2

The second photograph should be a perspective of the rear and other side of the building. These two perspective shots now comprehensively document the exterior of the structure.



Illustration #3

The third photograph should document what architects call the “front elevation.” An elevation is drawing to scale of the side, front, or rear of a building. Projecting features such as window and door moldings, window sills, steps, and eaves are all rendered as if they were totally flat. An elevation photograph shows the true proportions of one side of a building. Because that side is parallel to the film plane—taken straight on from the front of the structure--approximate measurements can be taken from the photograph. In fact, measured drawings can be taken from a carefully controlled elevation photograph shot with a view camera.



Illustration #4

We recommend an environmental view showing the building as part of its larger landscape. This will be a wide shot that includes marshlands and other surrounding environmental features.



Illustration #5

Next photograph the major elements of the building, including doors, windows, additions, and lastly move in close for details, including materials and hardware. If planning to take more than four photographs, first carefully study the building and make a list of those things that should be photographed. Rarely will it take more than ten photographs to adequately document the exterior of a building.



Illustration #6

What about interiors? First, identify the major space, room, or area in the building and then the way the other spaces are organized. Interior photographs should yield information about the floor plan of a building. Some structures, such as hangars, barns, and some industrial buildings, are architectural shells enclosing a major space. For such a structure, the first photograph would be taken from a corner opposite the main entrance and shot diagonally across the space. As with exteriors, the second photograph should be taken from the opposite corner, or should document an important element of the interior.

To gain information on the floor plan, set up the camera to shoot toward the main doorway, if possible, with the door open to reveal the spaces and rooms beyond. A three-view sequence might include the entry hall, showing how rooms open off of it, the main formal room, and a functional working space such as the kitchen. Three or four views should be sufficient to document the significant elements of the interior, rarely more than seven or eight.

As you can see, a building can be well documented with seven photographs. The sequence of views described here can be used for nearly all photographic documentation of buildings, including the method recommended by the National Register of Historic Places. Finally, when approaching a building, remember that probably only one photograph of the building will ever be published. In choosing the view to photograph, the main question to ask is what one view yields the most information about the structure?